

## Civil War Book Review

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Fall 2003

Article 24

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### Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830-1860

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#### Recommended Citation

Rael, Patrick (2003) "Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830-1860," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss4/24>

## Review

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**Tate, Gayle T.** *Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830-1860*. Michigan State University Press, \$28.95 ISBN 870136534

Vindicated voices

Study recovers history of struggle

According to the American humorist Oliver Herford, a man is known by the silence he keeps. Perhaps this is so, but women's silences, we must acknowledge, have long rendered them unknown. So much more has this been the case with women of African descent, whose historical silence has been amplified all the more by the added effects of caste and class prejudices. Only in recent years has the work of recovering black women's voices begun to elevate our knowledge of their role in the American past to the point where serious analysis can begin. In **Unknown Tongues: Black Women's Political Activism in the Antebellum Era, 1830-1860**, Gayle Tate continues these important projects of recovery and analysis. In treating the wide range of roles free and enslaved African-American women played in the activist struggles of the antebellum period, the book strives to serve as both a synthesis of existing scholarship and an original interpretation of its topic.

The book's seven chapters take the story of antebellum black women from the slave South to the nominally free North. The first two chapters detail life under slavery, arguing that the very conditions by which black women were oppressed also served as their means of resistance. Enslaved women formed the core of communal resistance, fostering a culture of dissent and subversion through their roles as culture-bearers and socializers. As Tate writes on page 54: "By sustaining the social network of communal life, slave women provided succor to slave members while simultaneously creating political space that legitimized individual acts of courage, subversive outrage against the system, collective forms of protest, escape, and insurgency as rights of the exploited.

Moving north, Tate's women encounter the burgeoning industrial economy of the market revolution, where they became marginalized in an affluent society, largely relegated to the sorts of gendered domestic labor which permitted middle-class white women to emerge as public sphere reformers. Here again, black women relied on collective resistance, functioning as the locus for community activism. Tate writes on page 91: "Imprisoned by their gender, race, and class, black women, of necessity, confronted urban industrialization with nothing but their labor power and the determination to meet the basic material necessities of life for themselves and their families. The final chapters witness African-American women engaging in racial politics through their roles as spiritual caretakers, and eventually as key players in abolitionist organizing and agitation. Tate surveys the careers of black women Evangelicals, such as Jarena Lee, and recounts the efforts of the most important bi-racial female antislavery societies. Many of the insights here will be by now familiar to scholars, if not to lay readers: black women challenged white women's understandings of abolitionism, challenging them to confront their own racial biases and to press for racial equality in the North in addition to abolition in the South.

The most dominant theme in the book--and the clearest indication of the author's interpretive stance--addresses the issue of black women's agency. Tate argues throughout that African-American women exerted their "labor will" to build group political cohesion and resist the multiple oppressions they faced as blacks, as women, and as workers. This approach is not new, though Tate presses it about as far as any other scholar has. By now, there is a long tradition of community studies scholarship which has worked to find evidence of the oppressed asserting their agency on their own behalf, challenging the notion of blacks as passive victims of oppression. **Unknown Tongues** partakes fully of this school, asserting repeatedly that black women acted successfully on their own behalf, and invoking a wide range of scholars in support.

What makes Tate's argument novel is not simply the degree of agency it ascribes to black women. **Unknown Tongues** posits a continuity between the resistance activities of enslaved women and those of free women. Tate paints black women's activism as emerging from the inchoate politics of the slave household and then community, into the lives of free black women workers, and finally into the overtly political efforts of evangelical women and black women abolitionists. This approach offers a narrative of progress and continuity that may serve well as a convenient heuristic, but it not particularly historical. The

public activism of northern free blacks emerged not as a consequence of internal migration, as the author intimates, but alongside the growth of a southern plantation complex attempting to keep pace with the demand created by the mechanizing North. The book's frequent references to blacks in the "industrial North" paint a region far more advanced than was the case in the antebellum period (Northern society was very much an agrarian society before the Civil War, despite its nascent industrialization), and a black population far more urban than it was. Some basic statistics might have helped document the social context black women operated in, and may have prevented some confusion.

There is a more crucial problem raised by the book's underlying vision of a progressive evolution from slave South to free North. In its quest to empower all antebellum black women, all seem equally empowered. The author argues that enslaved women "reconstructed" their "labor power" into "an oppositional force of resistance"; in other words, that they appropriated the "tools of oppression" to resist oppression, and did the best they could. Similarly, she states that free women workers made the most of the marginalized economic niches permitted them. Yet the important differences between possibilities for empowerment of difference are never systematically explored *as differences*. While, as Tate argues on page 53, mere survival may in some instances have constituted resistance, resistance must at times have encompassed more than this. For what use is the concept of agency if agency is always being manifested successfully and equally? Of what purpose is the term "political" if all activity becomes similarly political?

What factors, then, conditioned differences in the likelihood of success of some forms of resistance over others? The author herself notes that black women's activism was circumscribed by the material conditions of black life and the limits imposed by racism, which obviously varied over time and space. It would have been quite helpful to have structured this exploration of black women's agency around the factors--such as the legal foundations of slavery, popular racial attitudes, urban vs. rural environment, the varying demographics of regions within the African diaspora, and controls on black labor--that worked to permit or delimit the possibilities of black women's agency.

In its desire to imbue virtually all black women with political agency, **Unknown Tongues** ultimately neglects crucial distinctions among black women, rooted in differences of class, color, and relationship to the institution of slavery. The book argues that even the most menial employments were tools of resistance

insofar as they kept bread on the table, yet this glosses over the black elite's calls for blacks to lift themselves out of service occupations into the ranks of producers. Little is made of tensions between a self-appointed, middle-class black leadership class (among whom women numbered), and the great mass of northern blacks who lacked the means (if not the desire) to embody middle-class virtues. That many black women had opportunities for entrepreneurial activity decidedly lacking in respectability open to them was of crucial importance in shaping black protest. While disreputable business endeavors such as brothel-keeping might have fostered survival, community solidarity, and positive self-knowledge, they also affirmed in the minds of racist whites the immoral and debased nature of blacks. Black leaders spared no pains to point out to their working-class charges that such racist attitudes were of great consequence in furthering the cause of slavery and inhibiting the equality of those who were free. For better or worse, then, there were important differences between black brothel-keepers and black newspaper editors, and surely these differences had potent consequences for the freedom struggle. By glossing over them, **Unknown Tongues** misses opportunities to further our understanding of the meaning of antebellum black resistance in its own time.

Nonetheless, it is a hopeful step in a direction other studies should take. Tate's serious consideration of the lives of non-elite women, her melding of community culture and political activity, her consideration of the multiple burdens black women shouldered--all bespeak a sensitive and nuanced approach to her topic. A lack of evidence sometimes fails to convey the texture and richness of these women's experience, and historians may bristle at a profusion of jargon ("micromobilization," "nexus women," "survival units," "group-centered collectives," "empowerment centers"). Nonetheless, Professor Tate offers an antidote to traditional approaches to the American past which have left black women historically silent. **Unknown Tongues** is an important contribution that will enrich our understanding of African-American women in antebellum America, and point the way to more scholarship in the future.

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